

THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY PRESS

Emily Schossberger

Fifteen years ago the conveners of a symposium on "Trends in American Publishing" would probably not have invited a representative of the then rather esoteric and little known field of the university presses. For until a few years after World War II and certainly for the two decades preceding it, the scholarly publishers on university campuses were hardly considered legitimate, far less as presenting an important segment of the publishing industry which had to be taken into account. With the exception of a few Ivy League schools, plus Columbia, Cornell and Johns Hopkins, and a little later of the universities of Chicago and California, the academic publisher was considered woefully amateurish. Thus the industry could well afford to ignore the scholarly presses, or to use them as places to which they could refer authors whose manuscripts, they knew, would not be profitable to publish. The label "a typical university press book" was used to characterize the often ponderously written, jargon-laden and treatise-like manuscript which might later find its published form in a drab, badly printed hardback of forbidding and voluminous proportions.

For in those pre-sputnik days the campus publishers were mainly concerned with issuing research reports and monographs, primarily destined for the specialists and the libraries in their fields, and of interest exclusively to the academic community. Although many of these influenced the course of research, only very rarely was a book published which was destined actually to change attitudes or to bring such new insights that a whole discipline was born—and not many presses were as lucky as Chicago at the end of the last century when it published John Dewey.

During the nineteen-thirties and forties, before the "egghead" had achieved his post-sputnik recognition, his writings were either neglected—especially in the humanities—or branded as smacking too much of the ivory-tower mentality. Professors' books, written mostly for other professors or students and researchers in their fields, were subsidized by the parent institution and issued in small editions—a rather costly enterprise as many university administrators came to learn to their sorrow. Yet such publications were always highly prestigious and contributed to the standing of the university proper

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by making the intellectual endeavors of the faculty available in print. This was the original motivation for the establishment of a press on a university campus, and it is still firmly kept in mind by those responsible for the publications coming now from many different university presses, and this at a time when every twelfth book published in the U.S.A. comes from a scholarly press.

The press on campus used to be represented by a professor who "ran the press" on a halftime appointment and as an avocation, with occasional clerical and student help and whose editor, in addition to supervising the publication of the college catalogs and announcements, edited the occasional scholarly manuscript. In the 1920's an informal group representing the then (and now) big university publishers got together; this was the nucleus of the Association of American University Presses (AAUP), founded in 1937, which soon tried to lay a few ground rules for the academic presses. One of these laid down that to qualify for admission to the association, a press had to have at least five full-time employees, the director (no full-time teacher running it on the side!) and had to show a close connection with the university administration. The minimum "yearly output" at that time was fixed at five books a year, with a scholarly quarterly which appeared regularly being counted as one "book." When I myself entered scholarly publishing in 1940, there were twenty-eight presses represented in the AAUP compared with sixty-eight in 1967, including some associate members from outside the U.S., who are admitted under much more stringent conditions.

However it was other outside circumstances, having nothing to do with the quality of research or the willingness of the university administrations to support such costly ventures, which brought the shrinking violets of the publishing scene to long-deserved prominence. At the end of World War II, materials for book production became available again, but steep increases in costs for paper, cloth, labor, replacement of machinery in the printing plants and the like, greatly influenced the calculations of commercial publishers. They suddenly found that their break-even point in publishing a book had risen from 2000 before the war to 3,500 and over. This meant that they had to publish editions of 4-5,000 copies to be able to show a profit. And since fiction was in great demand after the war by a tired reading public seeking mainly escape, publishers concentrated on this field rather than on the non-fiction book, which even before the war had lagged greatly in accumulated sales figures and which some publishers had taken on only for respectability's sake. Thus during the late forties, an "information gap" suddenly opened up into which the university presses were to step, some of them eagerly, others rather gingerly. But it was then, in the late forties and early fifties, that a certain "retooling" took place in the scholarly publishing industry, with an attendant increase in the number of university

presses, each financially guaranteed by its own university. For the academic publisher still was able, at that time, to break even with an edition of 1,500 on the average scholarly book, taking into account the small staff (paid by the mother institution), the small overhead, and the already hotly contested tax exempt status. Even though it was a rare university press which could actually sell 1,500 copies of a scholarly book in less than three to five years, the start of a greater demand for their kind of books, first triggered by the GI Bill of Rights, and later by the burgeoning enrollments, made it possible to continue publishing in spite of the rising costs, even though much of the advantage of subsidies was passed on to the "consumer" in the form of quite low prices.

Thus it came about that the university presses slowly and cautiously began to venture into the field of books for the general reader and not exclusively for the specialist. They brought to this task, of course, the access they had always had to first-rate scholarship, but also a greater professionalism among the publishing personnel who recognized that to be successful in the new and wider "market place" the "product" had to improve. Slowly, directors and editors from the commercial scene began to appear on university campuses and contributed enormously to the growing trend to professionalism. It was in those days that the University presses began to take a bigger hand in guiding their scholarly authors by helping them to break through the barriers of jargon and academic gobbledygook and by proving that well-digested scholarship could be presented with wit and grace, thus making the learned book interesting and often exciting reading. So it happened that some university press books became choices of the Book-of-the-Month Club, which was not only a shot in the arm for the fiscal officer of the press (although much less than was often assumed), but which was also a great help in focusing general attention on the university press and in dispersing the generally-held prejudice that a university press book was by its nature a dull book.

During this decade it was not only editorial skills which were sharpened to help the academic author communicate and reach the audience of the well-educated reader beyond the campus: the beginnings of a professional setup for distribution and sales were made, and again a leaf was taken from the commercial publisher's book. Increases in press personnel were in the fields of design, sales and promotion, and production; these people worked together toward making the scholarly "product" not only excellent in content, but also aesthetically and graphically attractive and economically competitive, as well as widely available. The techniques of advertising—space and direct mail—were explored and pinpointed, and commission salesmen, furnished with attractive seasonal and general catalogs, travelled the width and breadth of the continent to show the forthcoming

books to the trade and take advance orders, while direct-mail specialists were busy informing the section of readers most likely to be interested in a book of its scope, content and availability. But it took a long time to break down the distrust and unhappiness of the retail bookseller about the university press book which "nobody knows about because of lack of information, whose catalogs are written in incomprehensible language, which are never available at the time announced and are extremely expensive to handle because they do not carry enough discount to make their stocking attractive."

Then, towards the end of the fifties and the beginning of the sixties, the academic publishers began to profit from the "information explosion" and from a new phenomenon in publishing, the attendant "paperback explosion" which enabled the presses to profit from the increased enrollments by reprinting standard works or their own backlists for a mass undergraduate audience which was assigned "collateral readings." With the increased stress on education on every level and the upgrading of education in general as well as the increase in enrollment, the university publisher, able to attract the best minds on and off campus, often found himself able to publish one book which returned a profit. This meant that it returned more than the investment of editorial time, plant costs, advertising, selling and warehousing—a very rare phenomenon indeed for the average academic publisher. But so-called "profits" on one book were being plowed back to enable the press to publish the scholarly book for a narrow audience which would never "carry its weight," the publication of which, however, was a duty in order to fulfill the press's calling, the enrichment of scholarship. And as the business of education grew, the demand for books also increased and manuscripts from all over the learned world came in or were solicited, not merely those resulting from the research of the university's own faculty, to publish which the presses had been set up in the first place. Scholarship is international and interdependent and the scholarly press in America, in order to keep up, looked to other countries, mainly in Europe and Latin America, and brought out many scholarly works in translation. Thus, the University of Texas "hit the jackpot" for a little while when it issued Platero and I,¹ the poems of Juan Ramón Jiménez, who later in the year distinguished himself by winning the Nobel Prize for literature. In the field of theology, for instance, European scholars beat a new path; first it was the French, then the Germans and Austrians, and now the daring Dutch whose works in translation are forging new ways of understanding by presenting the teachings of Christ in relation to modern life. In 1961, the University of Chicago Press, one of the first to recognize the need for introducing foreign scholarship in translation, brought out a classic, first published in 1939, a landmark in historical-sociological writings, the late Marc Bloch's Feudal Society.² That some of these

books turned out to be highly salable probably contributed to the myth that university press publishing had become profitable and was "encroaching upon the domain of the commercial publisher," a common recent complaint.

The fifties also saw a strengthening and increase in importance of the Association of American University Presses, which as early as 1949 had conducted a survey, the now famous Kerr Report,³ about the organization and management, financial and otherwise, of the presses then belonging to the association. A secretariat was established in New York to conduct association affairs. A look at the list of committees, such as Membership, Advice and Assistance, International Cooperation, Education and Training, and Library Relationships, will give an idea of the scope and the work of the association, which a few years ago also founded the sister organization of AUPS—American University Press Services, which issues the highly valuable Scholarly Books in America quarterly, a handy information and order tool for the whole academic world, especially the libraries; AUPS also supervises and often mans the exhibits at scholarly meetings—more than two dozen rate as extremely important ones to attend; at the moment, furthermore, AUPS is at work on a cooperative bibliography for high school libraries. The scope and interest of AAUP is world-wide, as the explorative travels of some of the directors to investigate African and Asian university presses well testify. The work of the association on behalf of the thorny copyright question in Congress is well known, as is its cooperation with other associations such as the American Book Publishers Council. The committee on standards and admissions watches carefully to insure that each new press applying for membership fulfills the established requirements; it sometimes takes several years from application to admission, until the investigators are completely assured that the press has continuous university support and that its publications are on a high level and issued at regular intervals. For still, even with all the attention paid to sales, distribution, and balance sheets, the most outstanding characteristic of a university press imprint is that it is safeguarded by a board of scholars who must pass on every manuscript submitted to see that it meets standards, whose only criterion is the value of the book, and whose only question is: "Does it make a contribution to knowledge?" This is why a press has to be supported by its university and carried as a department of the university; none of the financial considerations which usually color the decisions in commercial publishing houses should enter its decision-making. Increased sales have been due to a great extent to the information explosion and also to the many grants which until recently enabled libraries to be more lavish with their spending dollars.

An example may be enlightening here. The University of Oklahoma Press, while always true to its calling to publish the original

product of scholarship, skillfully entered the "general book" market with the very product it was called on to publish: the gold found in its own backyard. This Press soon distinguished itself by issuing the Civilization of the American Indian, and by constantly publishing works in Western history, long before the vogue for such books made the "commercial" venture of its Western Frontier Library feasible. These books were brought out in a small format at reasonable prices; they treated the histories, personal and otherwise, of the settling of the Great American West and have been a great success. Oklahoma is a shining example of the successful university press: regional and particular, general and universal works, all distinguished by good scholarship and extremely high standards of graphic presentation.

Although one may speak of a group of publishers when mentioning the academic presses, there are almost no two that are similar in character or, as we like to say, show the same profile. Leafing through the Directory of the AAUP, which also contains the three Canadian presses (Toronto, Presses de l' Université Laval and McGill University Press) and the one of Mexico, one is struck by the diversity of scope and size, by the difference in numbers of employees both specialist and clerical, which range from five to a hundred and fifty or more, and by the variety of "output" which ranges from seven a year (Tennessee, Vanderbilt, Brown, Miami, South Carolina) to:

	<u>1965</u>	<u>1966</u>		<u>1965</u>	<u>1966</u>
Harvard	135	133	Columbia	91	79
Chicago	139	137	Illinois	37	42
California	139	143	Kentucky	12	28
Yale	80	108	Oklahoma	39	50
			Princeton	78	104

There is a rich sprinkling in the middle category which until two years ago used to be between fifteen and thirty, and now has gone to between twenty and fifty. Most midwestern presses are in this group, among them Notre Dame with fifty-five (thirty in 1965 and twenty-seven in 1966). Their geographic distribution comprises all four points of the compass with the heaviest concentration, of course, on the eastern seaboard. But there are now nineteen midwestern presses properly speaking, and about the same number in the South. There is Texas, really in a category by itself, with special interest in Latin America and many translations from the Spanish and Portuguese on its lists. Louisiana State University made a name for itself early in the game by publishing its distinguished series of southern history; North Carolina is well known for studies in sociology and race relations, while Nebraska is interested in its own pioneer heritage, publishing

books on the history of the state and colorful pioneer accounts, but also with a strong list in the humanities as well as a series on the renaissance theatre. Iowa State has staked out its domain in agriculture, agricultural journalism and veterinary sciences, in which the school excels, and has only recently branched out into the humanities.

Such a short run-down (it must be cursory because it is impossible to examine and evaluate the lists of all sixty-eight presently represented in the Association) indicates clearly not only the variety and diversity within a group, but also the many and various professional skills needed to produce, advertise, market and sell the many books which together give an impressive picture of our present state of learning and thus of our civilization.

A quick examination of Scholarly Books in America, the bibliography of all books published by university presses four times a year, gives at a glance a survey of the many fields in which the academic presses publish: Agriculture and Animal Sciences; Art and Architecture; Biology; Anthropology and Archeology; Business and Economics; Chemistry; Communication Arts; Education; Engineering and Math; Geography and Geology; History with its subdivisions of African, American, Asian and European, divided into periods; Law; Languages and Literature; Linguistics; Literary Criticism; Folklore; Poetry; Music; Medicine; Philosophy and Religion; Political Science; Psychology; Sociology; and reference books of all sorts.

All the foregoing is history. It held true until a couple of years ago, but the picture has started to change slightly. Although the unprecedented upsurge of publishing, caused by the many government grants and funds for libraries and new schools, has carried away the university presses to the point where they have all had to increase their programs to keep in step with increasing enrollments and increasing faculty "output," the dawn of a new era is appearing, one which will cause not a few breast beatings and soul searchings.

First there is the competition. Time was when the commercial publisher referred the author of a too serious work to the university press because the book would not sell. Now many commercial publishers are in competition with the university presses.

Recently, Doubleday has started issuing in paperback a series of essays on philosophers which, had it been intended for hardback publication, would deservedly have been called a university press undertaking. Similarly, the attempts by publishers to tie up paperback rights to university press books, as in Atheneum's arrangement with Harvard, are another indication of this trend. Some of Notre Dame's academic books of rather limited appeal have found their way to the paperback lists of Simon and Schuster and World Publishing, and co-publishing with commercial publishers (for example, Notre Dame-Association, Chicago-Kegan Paul, Notre Dame-Methuen) has been customary during recent years. The established academic

author is exposed to a constant bombardment from the representatives of the commercial publishers who swarm on campus, tying up not only the promising textbook, but often an outstanding symposium which might contain the germ of future publication. They too have upped the quality of their products, and now provide competition for the scholarly publisher who cannot always overcome the lure of higher royalties and better distribution through a vast sales force by insisting on the distinction of a university press imprint. Thus university presses are far from being a threat to the commercial publishers of non-fiction, who only a short while ago bitterly complained about competition from the tax-exempt publishers.

It seems, therefore, that the once-sharp line of distinction between the scholarly and hence non-profit publishers and the commercial houses is beginning to get blurred. Still, the university presses have never forgotten their primary obligation to the world of scholarship—to make the fruits of scholarship available to the widest possible public. Contrary to the opinion of most people, even the experts in the industry, a university press never makes money. If we sometimes hit on a book which returns a modest profit—and it has to be one that is either picked up by a book club or, in paperback, prescribed as collateral reading for undergraduates—the money is ploughed back into the next books which will certainly produce a loss. Picture an industry which pays an enormous overhead because its employees are, and must be, subject matter specialists; picture a “product” which is very expensive to produce, especially with the modern printing machines now aimed at speed, and which needs a lot of handwork and special attention—footnotes, foreign language, math and other special characters; picture an industry which produced such a product—and it now takes at least nine months from manuscript to book—slowly and in limited numbers; which publicizes this product at great cost; and which pays a premium (10 percent to 15 percent) sales commission, and then has to slap an additional discount on its product which varies from 10 percent to 50 percent. And then tell me if such a business, which in addition caters to the few who do not belong to the affluent society, could exist and would be at all viable if it were not both tax exempt and subsidized.

That university presses make a profit and therefore unjustly compete with the commercial publishers is a legend which bears closer scrutiny. No university press (with the exception maybe, in particular years, of Chicago and Harvard) has ever made money. First, even though the university “subsidizes” the salaries, running the press like a department of the university, the money has to come from some source. Ask any state university how much difficulty it has with the legislature defending year after year the appropriation for press salaries and offices. In addition, the production of books costs the scholarly publisher much more than the commercial one

who does not touch anything under a five thousand or seven thousand run, as recently testified by that astute long-time publisher, Bennett Cerf.⁴ In the private institutions, when money is forthcoming for the press it is usually budgeted after momentous decisions about which department is more important, and if there is ever a conflict between, say, the department of psychology which needs a new professorship and a subsidy for the press, it will be the university department which carries the day. Thus the university press administrator is constantly on the watch lest his budget be cut, and lest the deficit, which it is his duty to hold down to manageable dimensions, exceed what was grudgingly granted at the beginning of the fiscal year. Even when a press says it "breaks even" this does not include the overhead or the other costs of running a business, such as getting the merchandise from the shelf to the customer, but only means that the cash expenses of turning out the product are matched by the cash receipts of sales and other subsidiary income. All presses depend on grants for special series and on one-time help to get out a specific book, in addition to the university subsidy. But what publisher could stay in business if he broke even only on production costs? Who would pick up his overhead of between 33.3 and 40 percent of his expenses, based on rent, utilities, salaries, sales commissions, royalties, and so on? Indeed, a good case could be made for the fact that the university press makes it possible for a professor to acquire a reputation by publishing his (unprofitable) book so that the commercial publisher then can tie him up for a textbook on which both will make money.

In the last two years another shadow has appeared, about which university presses might become wary. I am thinking of the marriage between soft-ware and hard-ware, between the electronic industry and the publishers; cases are too numerous to give more than one example, that of Harper and CBS. It seemed for a while that the enormous development in this sector, together with information storage and retrieval, might spell the end of big editions of university press books. However, the trend seems to be in another direction, primarily that of the faster acquiring of knowledge and, even more, of skills. Thus the scholarly publisher, who never depended on textbooks, will not be hurt by this development, especially since few university publishers—to the chagrin of Professor Shugg,⁵ director emeritus of Chicago and now director of the University of New Mexico Press—publish in the sciences. On the other hand, the severe restriction of what could be called quality departments, within one of the most distinguished commercial publishers, Harper & Row, indicates that another gap may open which the academic publishers will again be called, and prepared, to fill.

Librarians have repeatedly assured us that there will always be a need for the printed book, in spite of the burgeoning of audio-visual education. But again, two years ago, Shugg⁵ suggested that academic

publishers would have to retool, that they had no right to impose the criteria of the literate humanist on the new scholarship which is dependent on the amassing of data and which has learned, and speaks, a different language. At that time he took issue with the university presses who seemed to neglect their duty towards the sciences, and he advocated that the university press should orient itself towards what Clark Kerr, at that time still president of the University of California, had called the "multiversity." But the promised and expected government grants for new research which have been flowing so freely in recent years, and which of course have produced a lot of writing, are going to dry up, as will, unfortunately, the liberal help to the new and existing libraries. There may well be a slowing up of the process of publishing, because the leisure and the money to produce new research, or new manuscripts, much of it funded by grants, will not be available much longer or not to the same extent.

Inevitably academic publishers will feel this change, and many of them will have to pull in their horns, unless their administrations are willing to subsidize them to a far greater extent than is now the case. For the roaring optimism of 1966, which led everybody to make most sanguine forecasts for the future, is slowly giving way before a reality which is not coming up to even the most conservative expectations. In the last two years, the smaller and middle-size presses suffered somewhat from the competition of their larger brethren, for the rush of new manuscripts went first to the Ivy League, whose presses showed a marked increase in the number of books published. There simply are not enough first-rate manuscripts to go around, even though a new generation of researchers, professors and writers has sprung up which is producing more manuscripts—the academic motto of "publish or perish" is as valid as ever. Yet the picture will soon change, and those academic presses which have not expanded beyond their capacities—or those of their universities' financial offices—will be better off for the quick death of some of the easy money. Lucky the press which has a good backlist and can "live off" the older books while retrenching judiciously on the publication of the new ones, weeding out rigorously everything that is not first class. Yet in spite of these considerations, still more universities feel that they want the prestige of a press and persuade themselves that there is room for more university publishing. They may come to a rude awakening, for hardly any administrator recognizes what a constant burden on the university budget a press will become.

Yet in spite of all these varying and sometimes contradictory trends, I can envision a future in which the university press book, because it is visionary, because it brings the newest results of scholarship to the attention of those educated and to be educated, and precisely because it cannot be written and produced in a month but

needs years of gestation, will continue to be the most valuable tool for conserving our civilization. It will remain one of the outstanding exceptions to the rule, more and more visible as we go along, that intellectual life in the U.S.A. is being channelled by government and the banking industry.

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